How the Bolsheviks won leadership of the masses

Tue, 11/09/2007 - 16:49

The Russian workers, particularly those in Petrograd, had suffered a very real setback after the mass street demonstrations of the July Days (3-4 July according to the Julian calendar). Although the Bolsheviks had opposed any attempt to seize power as premature, given the balance of class forces across Russia, they had demonstrated at the head of the armed masses. Now as the demonstrators dispersed, recovering from its fright, the Provisional Government went onto the offensive. The bourgeois press accused the Bolsheviks of leading a failed putsch, slandered their leaders, like Lenin and Zinoviev, as ?German agents? attempting to sabotage the Russian military offensive then underway.

Key Bolshevik leaders such as Lev Kamenev, close allies such as Leon Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky from the Interdistrict Organisation (the Mezhrayontsy) and hundreds of rank and file Bolsheviks were arrested and imprisoned. Military cadets, former police officers and members of the proto-fascist Black Hundreds, carried out individual shootings and lynchings. In such witch hunt conditions the party decided that Lenin and Zinoviev should go underground, first in the countryside near Petrograd and later in nearby Finland.

The circulation of the party press halved in the month following the July Days. The morale of party members in the factories was at first shaken by the sudden turnaround in the situation. Yet as early as mid-July Yakov Sverdlov, a superb organiser and the senior Bolshevik leader left at liberty in the capital, was able to report ?the mood in Petrograd is hale and hearty. We are keeping our heads. The organisation is not destroyed.? Less than a month later the tide had turned again and was now flowing strongly in favour of the Bolsheviks. By the end of August the party had 240,000 members, three times that in April. What had brought about this rapid and dramatic change?

The answer lay not simply in the steadfastness of the Bolsheviks cadres, embodied in organisers like Sverdlov, nor yet in the principled yet flexible character of Bolshevik tactics and strategy, important as these were. It lay in the failure of the counterrevolution to inflict a decisive defeat on the vanguard of the working class and stabilise the military, political and economic situation of the country. Firstly the ?Kerensky offensive? at the front rapidly collapsed in the face of mass mutinies and desertions by the Russian troops and a German and Austrian counteroffensive. Prince Lvov, who had headed the government since the February revolution resigned and Alexander Kerensky, the war minister, and the leading figure in the cabinet since early May, took over as premier.

Kerensky wanted to play the part Napoleon Bonaparte played in the French Revolution ? that of stemming the revolutionary surge and isolating and destroying its most radical representatives the Bolsheviks, much as Napoleon crushed the remnants of the revolutionaries of 1792-4 (the Jacobins and their immediate successors). He demanded the banning of the Bolshevik party but the Mensheviks and SR ministers vetoed this, knowing that this would be a dangerous, even an impossible, step. He ordered the disarming...
of the workers factory militia, the Red Guard, and in this he was successful. He ordered the despatch to the front of some of the most radical regiments in the city garrison. But as Trotsky later observed this was to send 40,000 thoroughly politicised agitators to the trenches.

The High Command piled on the pressure for Kerensky to ?restore order? in the army grew. Alexei Brusilov the army?s commander-in-chief publicly demanded:

?There cannot be dual authority in the army. The army must have one head and one authority.? 

He wanted the complete and total restoration of military discipline, including the officers? right to shoot ?mutineers?. However Kerensky, whose own role as would be Bonaparte and ?strongman? rested on a balancing act between the soviets and the counter-revolution played for time by dismissing Brusilov and replacing him with Lavr Georgievich Kornilov, hitherto commander of the Petrograd military district - a man of no less counterrevolutionary opinions but more limited intelligence ? he was described by a fellow commander as having ?the heart of a lion but the brains of a sheep.? 

No sooner was Kornilov appointed than the imperialist bourgeoisie and the landowners began to rally around him, giving him lavish receptions and calling him the ?saviour of Russia.? It was plain they saw him as their saviour from the working class and its soviets, i.e. as just the man to instal a counter-revolutionary dictatorship.

However ? their ambitions aside- neither Kerensky nor Kornilov was a Napoleon. More important still the dynamic element of the Russian revolution, the proletariat and its Bolshevik vanguard, were far from being a spent force.

**Lenin and the soviets**

Lenin ? temporarily removed from the scene of action in the capital, for once misestimated the strength and completeness of the counter revolution. He was correct to characterise Kerensky?s intentions as bonapartist but he judged this to be more complete than was in fact the case. There were, as yet, only conflicting elements of bonapartism rather than a finished bonapartist regime in Russia. These clashing elements went by the names of Kerensky and Kornilov. Their conflict, when it broke cover at the end of August, was to lead to a decisive weakening of the forces of the counterrevolution. In short the situation in Russia in July and August was more that of a ?democratic counterrevolution,? one that preserved the legality of the mass workers organisations ? soviets, the workers parties, factory committees etc, but which directed severe repression against its vanguard, the Bolsheviks.

By mid-July Lenin had also come to the conclusion that the key governmental slogans that the Bolsheviks had used to such good effect up to and in the July Days ? ?All power to the Soviets? ? and ?Down with the ten capitalist ministers? were now outmoded. From hiding he warned the Bolsheviks:

?Too often has it happened that, when history has taken a sharp turn, even progressive parties have for some time been unable to adapt themselves to the new situation and have repeated slogans which had formerly been correct but had now lost all meaning?lost it as ?suddenly? as the sharp turn in history was ?sudden?.

Methodologically Lenin was right that when a major turning point occurs in a revolution the old slogans cannot simply be repeated unchanged in changed circumstances. The above slogans had been in effect a call on the Mensheviks and the SRs to take the power, with a promise that the Bolsheviks would, whilst remaining in complete opposition to them within the soviets, not attempt their armed overthrow and moreover defend their government against any attempt to do so by the counterrevolutionary forces. But the
July Days proved that the Mensheviks and SRs would cling to their alliance with the bourgeoisie, even when hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers offered them the power. Lenin’s analysis was as follows:

The cycle of development of the class and party struggle in Russia from February 27 to July 4 is complete. A new cycle is beginning, one that involves not the old classes, not the old parties, not the old Soviets, but classes, parties and Soviets rejuvenated in the fire of struggle, tempered, schooled and refashioned by the process of the struggle. (?) We must, at the beginning of the new cycle, proceed from the triumphant bourgeois counter-revolution, which triumphed because the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Mensheviks compromised with it, and which can be defeated only by the revolutionary proletariat. Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks must now prepare for an armed insurrection against the Provisional government and the present Soviet regime.

In fact Lenin was not only overestimating of the completeness of the counterrevolution’s triumph but also linking the call for power to the Soviets too narrowly to the perspective of a peaceful transfer, one which he had argued since April was possible. The dual power - or rather the pole of it represented by the workers’ Soviets, had indeed been greatly weakened by the Mensheviks and SRs’ support for the counterrevolution. But even now their support was far from total. They themselves had good cause, to fear the counterrevolution represented by Kornilov. He plainly wished to destroy the soviets and the soldiers’ committees altogether. This was revealed in a remarks he made to his aide general Lukomsky.

It is high time we seized all these German spies with Lenin at their head. And as for the rest we shall hit this Soviet of workers and soldiers so hard it will never dare to come out again.

Indeed he actually assigned one of his adjutants the task of shooting all the deputies of the Petrograd as well as the Kronstadt sailors’ Soviets.

The triumph of the counterrevolution would mean the end of the right wing socialists and populists too. Rumours of an impending coup were rife in the last weeks of August. If Kornilov actually moved to do this then it was likely the Mensheviks and the SRs? or at least their followers - would have to fight. That or the Bolsheviks would completely outflank them by initiating and leading the workers resistance.

However Lenin was correct to warn the party not to fetishise the existing soviets with their Menshevik leadership. Lenin looked to other organs like the factory committees, where Bolshevik influence was growing massively, as a more revolutionary mass base for the Bolsheviks to strike for power.

But in fact the soviets proved more responsive, more democratic and more active as instruments of the revolution than Lenin supposed. Moreover the slogan All Power to the Soviets could and would take on different meanings to that of being simply a call for a Menshevik and SR government.

Thus it is noteworthy that the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd, whilst they de-emphasised the slogan in this latter form, never withdrew it in its broader meaning - that the working class and the soldiers must break with the bourgeoisie and take power through their own democratic councils. At the Second City Conference of the Petrograd party many speakers came out against Lenin’s position as argued for by Stalin. One delegate argued:

There were moments when we had to fear the dispersal of the soviets but this time has now definitively passed.

Volodarsky supporting him added:
People who claim the counter-revolution is victorious are making judgments about the masses on the basis of their leaders. While the Menshevik and SR leaders are shifting rightwards, the masses are moving leftwards. Kerensky, Tseretelli and Avksentiev are caliphs for one hour. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" is not obsolete.

The party's refusal to go all the way with Lenin was indeed fortunate since the Bolsheviks would soon have to deploy the slogan again. Briefly in September, it was used once more as a call on the Mensheviks and SRs to break with the Provisional Government and Kerensky. More famously it was used in October as a call for a Bolshevik majority government.

The whole debate shows how utterly false is the Stalinist and bourgeois historian's common viewpoint that the Bolshevik Party was a monolithic block under the iron grip of an always correct (or, for the academics, dictatorial) Lenin. As we saw in April, in the July Days and as shall see again in the run in to the October Revolution itself the party engaged in vigorous internal debates about the correct way forward. Lenin often had to argue hard for his line and was neither always successful nor always tactically right, despite his overall strategic brilliance.

The plot thickens

In fact Kerensky's bonapartism rapidly proved not so much a dictatorship as a precarious balancing act between revolution and counterrevolution. From 12 to 15 August he summoned a State Conference in Moscow to mobilise support for his attempts at strong government. Held in the Bolshoi Theatre, home of the Imperial Ballet, Kerensky tried to placate both the serried ranks of the representatives of big business and the officer corps to his right and the Menshevik/SR soviet delegates to his left. Referring to the July Days he ranted:

"May everyone know, and may those know who have already attempted to raise an armed hand against the people's government, that these attempts will be crushed by iron and blood." Our patience has reached a limit and anybody who exceeds that limit will come up against a force whose repressive strength will remind these criminals of the old regime.

Kerensky's hysterical assertions of power fooled neither side, but least of all did they convince the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie that he was the man of destiny, the man to save Russia. In fact during Kornilov's own highly theatrical arrival for the State Conference in Moscow was greeted by Radichev, a representative of the Cadet Party, with the significant cry - "Save Russia and her grateful people will crown you!"

Meanwhile, the army high command and the bourgeois parties stepped up their plotting to carry out a full scale counterrevolution, to install a military dictatorship.

Even before July the Bolsheviks had established themselves as the leadership of key fighting units of the working class. Their influence in the factory committees had increased, with 82% of the delegates at the August All Russian Factory Committee Conference endorsing their call for soviet power. They led a successful general strike in Moscow against the State Conference, even though the strike had been fiercely opposed by the right wing leadership of the Moscow soviet.

More and more sections of workers were demanding a break from Kerensky and the Provisional Government. This was demonstrated by a frankly pro-Bolshevik resolution from the young workers of Putilov:

"We, the youth, having learnt from the experience of our fathers how dangerous it is to fraternise with the bourgeoisie, declare that it will be a fearful hour when we, the youth, for the salvation of the revolution take
to the streets to destroy with our young hands those parasites who live off the blood and sweat of the toilers. [We express] our profound scorn for the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks who continue to cohabit with the bourgeoisie and allow themselves to be led on a leash by Kerensky and Tseretelli.

Major battles lay ahead and this was patently clear to the most class-conscious workers. But the July Days had taught the workers the need for discipline and clarity about their objectives, the need to avoid premature and sporadic outbursts.

Kerensky’s government though increasingly exposed was still trying to crack down on the organised workers. Keremsky was himself plotting a coup, but it was to be his coup, not the generals. On 24 August he closed down the Bolshevik press once again. But unfortunately for his decisive circles of the bourgeoisie were preparing to oust him and his government. In co-ordinated blow on the 27 August the bourgeois Cadets resigned from the Provisional Government and General Kornilov, announced that he was marching on Petrograd to restore order in the capital. There was of course no disorder in the capital but the long depressed stock market suddenly soared as the capitalists anticipated the counter-revolution’s victory. Privy to the whole plot was Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador whose Embassy was something of an organising centre for the coup within the capital.

Kerensky who was privy to and indeed in agreement with Kornilov’s measures to crush the Soviets and soldiers committees, suddenly realised to his horror that the general intended to overthrow the whole Provisional Government, including himself. That would be the end not only for his own bonapartist ambitions but possibly his life. Thus Kerensky, in fear and trembling as to the consequences of doing so, turned to the Soviet to save himself.

**Kornilov’s coup and the united front**

The Mensheviks and the SRs too panicked when they realised a coup was underway. For six months, under the cover of the “dual power regime” they had allowed the forces of counterrevolution a chance to gather their strength and strike back. Now in terror they had to turn to the Bolsheviks to rescue them. The Party was now put to the test of leading a united front of resistance to the counter-revolution.

The news of Kornilov’s march on Petrograd led to huge mass meetings in the factories. Every one of them vowed to defend the city and urgently demanded arms from the Soviet Executive. The Baranovskii Machine Construction factory resolved:

?We demand that the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet, give arms to the workers, who not sparing their lives, will stand as one in defence of the just rights of revolutionary democracy, and together with our brethren soldiers, will erect an impassable barrier to the counterrevolution. ?

Thousands of Petrograd workers threw themselves into the struggle to stop Kornilov, at least 25,000 enlisted for the Red Guards who were co-ordinated by the Soviet’s Military Revolutionary Committee. The government was forced to re-arm the militia they had disarmed in July. At Putilov 8,000 of the workforce were sent to perform defence and agitation duties. Those who remained behind achieved three weeks output of cannon in three days in order to defend the revolution!

The Menshevik leadership of the Petrograd Soviet were obliged to set up a Committee of Struggle against the Counterrevolution and to invite the Bolsheviks to participate in it. There were three delegates apiece from the SRs, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks plus delegates from the main trade unions. But this no longer represented the real balance of forces as Sukhanov a Menshevik-Internationalist recorded in his Memoirs.
The committee making defence preparations had to mobilise the worker-soldier masses. But the masses insofar as they were organised were organised by the Bolsheviks and followed them. At the time theirs was the only organisation that was large, welded together by elementary discipline and linked with the democratic lower levels of the capital. Without it the committee was impotent.

The Bolshevik party had grown so rapidly that by the end of August it had some 240,000 members nationwide. Kerensky was thus forced to cower behind a proletarian wall defending Red Petrograd, fearful of what rearming the Bolsheviks would mean. In the short term he simply had no alternative. The Bolshevik leaders were released from jail and the party’s propaganda and agitation was given free rein. Bolshevik militants were prominent in all the mobilisations to halt Kornilov.

The problem for the Bolsheviks was how to use these mobilisations to win the remaining sections of masses, soldiers as well as workers, definitively away from the Mensheviks, that is how to intensify the contradictions between the rank and file Mensheviks and SRs and their compromised leaders?

Kamenev and Lenin develop the policy

Until the outbreak of the Kornilov coup Lenin had stuck to his line that because the counterrevolution had already occurred in July, talk of a military coup was Menshevik play acting. He vigorously demanded no blocks or alliances with the Mensheviks. Only as the reality of the situation bore in on him and the opportunities it offered became clear did he change his tactics.

Fortunately once again the Bolsheviks on the ground realised the necessity of united action with the Mensheviks, the SRs and even Kerensky. Kamenev formulated the basis of a united front. Lenin too now realised the key to success lay in indirectly campaigning against Kerensky by demanding a more and more active, truly revolutionary war against Kornilov. The aroused workers must be mobilised to press partial demands on Kerensky which would develop the militant mood and reawakened confidence of the rank and file while exposing the weakness and vacillation of their leaders. He formulated demands on them, including the arrest of the Cadet leader Miliukov and Duma President Rodzianko who were backing Kornilov. He included the legalisation of the transfer of the land to the peasants, and workers’ control over grain distribution and the factories.

The Bolsheviks immediately demanded the arming of the Petrograd workers and the summoning of the militant Kronstadt, Vyborg and Helsingfors garrisons to Petrograd. The demand for weapons and training for the workers was immense, as Trotsky described In the districts, according to the workers’ press, there immediately appeared whole queues of people eager to join the ranks of the Red Guard. Drilling began in marksmanship and the handling of weapons. Experienced soldiers were brought in as teachers. By the 29th, Guards had been formed in almost all the districts. The Red Guard announced its readiness to put in the field a force of 40,000 rifles.

Involving the workers in the fight for their demands in the revolutionary defence of Petrograd was for Lenin, the means of taking them forward politically. That is why he insisted that demands be presented:

??not only to Kerensky, and not so much to Kerensky as to the workers, soldiers and peasants who have been carried away by the course of the struggle against Kornilov.

In denying Kornilov the right to overthrow Kerensky Lenin was in fact digging Kerensky’s grave, and the graves of all those who sought to compromise with him. As Lenin put it:

We are changing the form of our struggle against Kerensky. Without in the least relaxing our hostility towards him, without taking back a single word said against him, without renouncing the task of
overthrowing him, we say that we must take into account the present situation. We shall not overthrow Kerensky right now. We shall approach the task of fighting against him in a different way?.

This means of waging the struggle against Kornilov and Kerensky proved a resounding success. Kornilov was stopped in his tracks as his army dissolved around him under the pressure of Bolshevik agitators and sabotage by militant railway workers. Trotsky describes the scene as the Cossacks approached Petrograd:

?From the direction of Petrograd innumerable delegations continued to arrive from regiments sent out to oppose the Kornilovists. Before fighting they wanted to talk things over. The revolutionary troops were confidently hopeful that the thing could be settled without fighting. This hope was confirmed: the Cossacks readily came to meet them. The communication squad of the corps would seize locomotives, and send the delegates along all railroad lines. The situation would be explained to every echelon. Meetings were continuous and at them all the cry was being raised: ?They have deceived us!??

This led to mutiny amongst the approaching troops. Even the so-called Savage Division of Caucasian mountaineers, when they realised that there was no ?pro-German uprising? in Petrograd arrested their officers and deserted Kornilov. Within days the advancing column literally dissipated like steam.

The political prestige of the Bolshevik Party took a giant leap forward in the aftermath of Kornilov?s defeat and Kerensky?s humiliation. The demands of the united front, addressed to Kerensky, the SRs and the Mensheviks, but carried into life by thousands of rank and file workers in the committees of struggle, was ?only? for the limited goal of defeating Kornilov. But by combining unity in action with a merciless critique of Kerensky and the conciliating Menshevik and SR leadership of the soviets the Bolsheviks proved to hundreds of thousands of workers that they were the only consistent defenders of the revolution. The united front was a bridge to the masses and a weapon against their reformist misleaders.

General Kornilov?s defeat at the hands of the Petrograd workers opened the final phase of the Russian Revolution. The workers had arms once again. A new confident tone was to be heard in factory meetings throughout the capital city. Factory after factory replaced their Menshevik or SR delegates to the Soviet with Bolsheviks.

In September the Petrograd Soviet passed its first Bolshevik resolution calling for a government of ?the revolutionary proletariat and peasantry?. In opposition the Mensheviks could only muster 15 votes out of 1,000 delegates for the Provisional Government! The Moscow Soviet passed a Bolshevik resolution four days later. The spectre of a Bolshevik majority at the nationwide congress of soviets was looming and with it the possibility that All Power to the Soviets might mean political power in the hands of the Bolsheviks and their allies.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/how-bolsheviks-won-leadership-masses